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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000183

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: JUMBLATT PESSIMISTIC ON ARAB LEAGUE,
LOOKING AHEAD TO FEBRUARY 14 COMMEMORATION

REF: BEIRUT 167

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Classified By: Ambassador Michele Sison for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) The Special Tribunal, the Arab League initiative and Amr Moussa's return to Lebanon, preparations for the February 14 commemoration of the assassination of PM Rafiq Hariri, and Hizballah arms were among the topics of conversation at a February 7 lunch hosted for the Ambassador by Druse leader Walid Jumblatt. Jumblatt and his March 14 colleagues were pessimistic that Moussa would achieve a breakthrough in the ongoing political impasse, and that the opposition's ultimate goal was to ensure that key leadership positions remained out of March 14 hands. March 14 hoped that the February 14 commemoration would help rally support for the majority, both domestically and internationally. They saw no way of getting rid of Hizballah's arms absent a major change in Hizballah's relationship, through Syria, with Iran. End summary.

2. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by DCM, Pol/Econ Chief, and Senior LES Political Advisor, attended a lunch hosted by Druse leader Walid Jumblatt. Telecommunications Minister Marwan Hamadeh and MP Henri Helou also were present.

HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR TRIBUNAL FUNDING

3. (C) Hamadeh said Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE planned to contribute a total package of \$21 million for the Special Tribunal, with the Saudis contributing \$11 or \$10 million and the two other countries splitting the rest. Admitting he did not know if the Saudi check was "in the mail," Jumblatt said Lebanon needed more than statements; it needed Saudi Arabia's financial support as well. Jumblatt who had recently returned from trips to Moscow and Saudi Arabia (reftel), added that Russia's contribution to the Tribunal (\$150,000) is extremely important politically as well. Saudi King Abdallah and Foreign Minister al-Faisal both told him Saudi Arabia would deposit \$1 billion in Lebanon's central bank to bolster reserves.

4. (C) Jumblatt expressed concerns for the security of the

Lebanese judges who were tapped as potential judges for the Tribunal. Despite the fact that the names had not been released, Hamadeh said it would be easy enough for the assassins to make an educated guess. Jumblatt also complained that the EU parliament planned to pass a resolution demanding the release of the four generals incarcerated in connection with the Hariri assassination, which Helou later confirmed would be on the agenda of a March 14 parliamentary delegation visit to Brussels beginning February 10.

LOW EXPECTATIONS FOR ARAB LEAGUE INITIATIVE

15. (C) Jumblatt did not believe Amr Moussa's return that day to Lebanon would result in a breakthrough in the political impasse, explaining that the Syrians would not give concessions before the Arab League summit in Damascus at the end of March. He said Saudi Arabia and Egypt should exert more pressure on Syrian President Bashar Asad to squeeze him. "If Bashar feels comfortable, why should he give up on Lebanon?" he asked. Both Saudi FM al-Faisal and King Abdallah are now adopting a hard position towards Syria and Iran, he claimed, adding that the Saudi officials described the leaders of the two countries as liars.

16. (C) Hamadeh said Moussa's return was necessary to demonstrate that there was continuing momentum towards resolving the political impasse; otherwise there would be a security failure. Jumblatt said the opposition's aim was to have a Prime Minister that is neither Saad Hariri nor Fouad Siniora. Its goal is to create a scenario whereby the Speaker is March 8, there is a neutral, consensus president, a non-March 14 prime minister, and a blocking minority. Furthermore, it wanted the

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Ministers of the Interior (to control the intelligence apparatus), Jumblatt claimed, though the others quickly added Justice (because of the Tribunal), Defense (Hizballah arms), and Finance (who has to sign off on any decree involving spending) to the list.

17. (C) Jumblatt warned that even if the Saudis are pressured and a new president is elected, the opposition will create discord while forming the new cabinet. If the new president fails to appoint a new cabinet, then Lebanon will be in a situation where Sleiman is the president, Hariri is the Prime Minister-designate, and Siniora will be the head of a caretaker cabinet that would be prevented from holding regular sessions, thereby affecting all of the government activities.

CONTEMPLATING ELECTORAL REFORM

18. (C) Asked about prospects for an agreement on electoral reform (the third element in the Arab League initiative, which the opposition demands must be part of a complete "package" on the presidency), Jumblatt, admitting he had not actually read it, said the draft Boutros law (which includes both proportional representation and simple majority voting) was complicated. Hamadeh remarked that proportional representation was difficult as long as there were confessional divisions in the country. Another idea, Jumblatt suggested, would be the creation of a bicameral legislature

19. (C) Jumblatt favored the "qada" (small district) law, commonly referred to as the 1960 law, but expressed concerns that March 14 would lose seven Christian MPs if Beirut was divided into a Christian and Muslim neighborhood. Jumblatt further advocated the establishment of new additional qada, for example one for the southern suburbs and one for Akkar. Berri would lose under the qada system, Jumblatt said,

although it might improve Hizballah's vote. Aoun preferred the qada system, as did Sleiman Franjieh, at least in his own district.

MASS RALLY PLANNED FOR FEBRUARY 14

¶10. (C) Jumblatt said March 14, which had held a planning meeting the day before on the issue, would hold a mass rally for the February 14 commemoration of the third anniversary of PM Rafiq Hariri's assassination to show both the Lebanese public and the world that March 14 was still here and has the support of the people. Helou commented that that people are reluctant to participate because they do not believe March 14 is able to deliver n anything.

¶11. (C) Hamadeh said March 14 will ncourage the participation of women and childrento show that it is a peaceful demonstration, like in 2005. Jumblatt, acknowledging security concerns about busing people into Beirut (recalling the February 13, 2007 twin bus bombing), said March 14 had instructed supporters to avoid routes and areas that are close to Hizballah areas, including the road where the January 27 clashes occurred. We have to be our own deterrent, he said. Hamadeh confirmed that the government would declare February 14 a national holiday.

MARCH 14 GETTING ORGANIZED

¶12. (C) Jumblatt was pleased that March 14 at long last had established a Secretariat (septel). He stressed the need for March 14 to name representatives in various influential capitals; the opposition is active in some major capitals and March 14 should not lose the card of having its own lobbies present. Jumblatt further added that March 14 is lacking proper media support. Currently only "one and a half" news stations were at its disposal: Hariri's Future TV, 100 percent pro-March 14, and LBCI, the main avenue for reaching the Christian audience, which is split into two because of an ownership dispute between Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea and LBCI chairman Pierre Daher.

AFTERMATH OF JANUARY 27 CLASHES

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¶13. (C) Jumblatt, who had spoken the day before with Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Chief of Staff General Shawki al-Masri (a fellow Druse), disclosed that the mood inside the Lebanese Forces was not positive in the aftermath of the January 27 clashes with Shia demonstrators. LAF officers who were arrested in the aftermath of the January 27 riots are asking why they are in prison and are concerned about the safety of their families, he reported. Hamadeh added that even some Shia officers were upset with the "clamping down" on the army, though they were reluctant to express this too loudly for fear of being labeled pro-March 14.

¶14. (C) Jumblatt believed the opposition was trying to create divisions among the Sunnis (the only counterweight to the Shia), by accusing the LAF of being Sunni partisans. Furthermore, the January 27 incidents were an attempt to paralyze the LAF.

NO FAREWELL TO ARMS

¶15. (C) Jumblatt said Hizballah knows March 14 cannot take away their arms, all the majority can do is discuss ways to integrate them into the army. Hamadeh recalled that the Taif agreement called for the "integration of militias," to which Jumblatt noted that Nasrallah had said the night before that it was a resistance, not a militia. Hizballah will only change, he said, if we cut their umbilical cord -- Syria-- to

Iran. More disturbing, Jumblatt said, was Aoun's statement that Hizballah should keep its arms until there was peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

GOL NOT TO BLAME FOR
SLOW COMPENSATION PAYMENTS

¶16. (C) Referring to recent attacks by the opposition that the Siniora government was failing to make compensation payments (via the High Relief Council) to victims of the 2006 war, Hamadeh said the delays were not the government's fault.

There were many complications, mostly related to bureaucracy and fraud. Some people who had received payments were not satisfied with the amounts, the GOL had to make advanced payments out of its own pockets for contributions pledged by other countries, some people made false claims, others did not have proper ownership documentation, etc. Furthermore, he said, the attacks were a campaign to torpedo the Saudis, who were contributing to the relief effort. Jumblatt noted that another problem was parliament's inability to meet to pass related legislation.

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